



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“Particular Redemption and Greatness in the Kingdom”

Matthew 20:17-28

TRANSCRIPT

The exposition of the word of God today is the 20th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. We are reading verses 17 through 28. Matthew chapter 20 verse 17 through verse 28,

“And Jesus going up to Jerusalem took the twelve disciples aside along the way, and said unto them, ‘Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.’ Then came to him the mother of Zebedees children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, ‘What wilt thou?’ She saith unto him, ‘Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom.’ But Jesus answered and said, ‘Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of (these words in the Authorized Version concerning baptism both in

“Particular Redemption and Greatness in the Kingdom” by S. Lewis Johnson
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this verse and the next are most likely not genuine since they are not found in the older and better manuscripts so we will omit them). “‘We are able.’ And he saith unto them, ‘Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared by my Father.’ And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren. But Jesus called them unto him, and said, ‘Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.’”

May God bless this reading of his word.

Our subject for this morning as we turn again to the Gospel of Matthew is “Particular Redemption and Greatness in the Kingdom.” The world and the church differ over many things but probably no more than over the question what is true greatness. For the world, true greatness lies in controlled use of power, or success from hard work, or it comes by the fickleness of fate. I think the famous words of Louis XIV, “I am the state,” illustrate the controlled use of power. And I think also that Shakespeare’s famous words in the *Twelfth Night* illustrate the fickleness of fate. He said, “Be not afraid of greatness; some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.”

Frederick the Great of Prussia was one of those rare leaders who understood exactly what true greatness was, at least from his perspective. He said, “It is the business of the king to be the chief of the servants of the state.” And that’s a remarkable statement

coming from a man of his type. Greatness finds its greatest manifestation in our Lord Jesus Christ, and I think in the atonement of the Son of God particularly. It is expressed in this text, with which the passage concluded our Scripture reading: even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

The use of ransom reminds us that we are indebted to this age’s madmen for the restoration to dignity at least, and or, at least popularity of the term ransom. Ransom has returned to page one and terrorized ambassadors and bankers and international businessmen pale at the mention of the term ransom today. It was a very familiar word in ancient times. After all, in the days in which the New Testament was written, many, many people were slave and knew what it was to have the hope of ransom.

And then, in addition, war was a very common thing then, too, and it was common in those ancient days for men to be ransomed after they had been captured during war. And particularly the Jews understood the idea of ransom, because according to Jewish Levitical law, the firstborn male of every family should have been priest, and so the families had to pay a certain ransom—a certain number of shekels—in order to keep that firstborn male from service as priest ideally.

In addition there were other means, or other other reasons for knowing of the existence and practice of ransom. If someone’s ox gored someone to death according to law, the person who owned the ox was guilty of murder, but he was able by virtue of payment of a certain mount amount of money to ransom his life. So the chances are, if you had been on the street corners in the East in the time that the New Testament was written, and if there were three people there, two of them might have not only known that ransom was a very common thing, but two of them might have been ransomed themselves.

Now that is a great deal different from our day, and were it not for the fact that in recent days our madmen have been ransoming outstanding businessmen and leaders and

politicians and others, we probably would have forgotten all about the word. But it was a very common thing and here we find ransom related to the atonement of the Lord Jesus.

I guess that ransom is most memorably expressed in the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, and atonement may be the most important word in Christian theology. The English word, atonement, comes from the English word, at, the preposition, at plus an old Middle English archaic word *onement*, so that atonement, “at-onement,” or, it refers to the restoration of the shattered relationship that took place as a result of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. So atonement is the means by which the Lord Jesus Christ in his sacrificial work has made it possible for men to be restored to a right relationship to God. Atonement. Well, we’ll see in a moment, I hope, that this is the climax of this passage that we are looking at: the atonement that the Lord Jesus has accomplished by virtue of his suffering death.

This passage that we’re looking at is a passage in which we have, first of all, our Lord’s third prediction of his suffering in Jerusalem. The apostles’ failure to understand what was going to happen evidently is the reason that the Lord Jesus felt it necessary to repeat three times that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die. And here again in verses 17 through 19 of chapter 20 we have that again. The apostles hear the Lord Jesus as he takes them aside. Along the way they make their way to the city of Jerusalem, “Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; the Lord said and the Son of Man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him.”

Now I don’t think there is anything of particular significance here since we have looked at this three times other than to note that there is mention here of the Gentiles, particularly. We sometimes are inclined to think from the reading of the New Testament that the apostles considered the death of our Lord to be the sole responsibility of the Jews, but if you read the New Testament carefully, you will see that that is not true and here in these verses the Lord Jesus makes it very plain that the death that Jesus Christ died

was a death that was brought about by the conjunction of the Jewish and Gentile leaders. But then there is hope and in the last sentence of the 19th verse, he adds, “And the third day he shall rise again.”

Now having said this as they were moving along the way toward the city of Jerusalem, there must have been a little company of them, and about this time the dici—the Apostles, James and John, evidently speaking to their mother, asked their mother to go to the Lord Jesus and make a request for them. And so she taking the lead at least in speaking, with the two men James and John, approached the Lord Jesus, evidently knelt down before him in a worshipful attitude and then said to him, “We would like to ask a question of you.” And the Lord Jesus said to her, what do you want? And she said, well grant if you will that these my two sons James and John may sit, one on the right hand and one on the left in thy kingdom.

Now I think there are several things to notice here. In the first place one might ask why did they have such an outlandish request that they should sit on the right hand and on the left of the Lord Jesus when the kingdom was to come to pass? Well the reason for this is found in the context. The Lord Jesus had just promised that when the Son of Man should come again he would sit on the throne of his glory, and the apostles would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. He had just said that in the 19th the in the 28th verse of the 19th chapter.

Now they had also heard him say that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and to die, so evidently, just as appears from the whole of the New Testament, these men heard very well the promises of glory but did not hear those that had to do with suffering. It illustrates the fact that we often hear the thing that we want to even when a preacher is preaching. We hear the things that we want to. The things that we are looking for we latch onto, and we hold them, forget the things that we don’t want to hear. So they had heard the promises of the glory, but they had forgotten the promises concerning the

sufferings. Evidently the thought of Jerusalem which the Lord Jesus had mentioned here gave them ideas again of the kingdom. And evidently, too, Peter and John thought—or James and John thought that their prospects were pretty good.

Now I want to point out one other thing here which I think needs mentioning, because we might think that the fault lay with the mother of the two two men, but you can tell from our Lord’s response in which he blames the two men, finding them culpable for this request, that is it is evident that they put their mother up to approaching the Lord Jesus.

Now Mark puts the words in the mouth of the men so that he understands that it is they who are really responsible for this request not the mother. So the mother is the tool of the men, and I say the answer of the Lord Jesus shows that he regards these two senior apostles as culpable.

Now of course we’re inclined immediately to blame the men, and we must not do that because, altogether, I should say because after all they were men of faith. It was something to believe that there was going to be in a kingdom and they did believe that. And furthermore it was something to believe that they would rule and reign. And so they have the idea, and they hold that idea that there is going to be a kingdom. They do believe he is the king, and they do believe that he will sit on the throne, but their faith is mingled with a great deal of selfishness because they wish the preeminent place.

Perhaps they were a little jealous of Peter who they thought might be the preeminent one. Why they asked this, well, we don’t know, especially except that they are men such as we are, and it’s very likely that we would have done much the same thing. The reply of the Lord Jesus is in essence two-fold. He said to them, you don’t know what you’re asking. Are you able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of? I made reference to the fact that the words concerning baptism are probably not genuine. They are genuine in the Markan account, and some early scribe familiar with Mark inserted them in the manuscript tradition of the Gospel of Matthew, and they’ve found their way

into a number of our texts. Incidentally, those words do express essentially the same thing that is expressed by “are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of,” for the baptism that he refers to is not a baptism in water which the Lord Jesus has already undergone at this place, but is really the baptism of his death.

Now his reply, I say, is in essence two-fold. It’s this. You’ve forgotten that the cross precedes the crown. I suffer I must suffer in order that I may reign. You don’t know what you’re asking. Are you able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of? Sufferings precede the glory. And they of course have forgotten all about that. They are thinking only about the glory. So that’s the first thing that he tells them. The cross precedes the crown.

Now this, I think, is of extreme importance when we talk about the relationship of our Lord Jesus to the kingdom. There are some people who believe our Lord Jesus came to offer a kingdom apart from a cross. They are wrong. Then there are some who do not believe in an earthly kingdom, who say that our Lord Jesus came simply to die upon the cross, and that there is no such thing as an earthly kingdom to come.

In my opinion, they too are wrong. Our Lord’s teaching, when we put it all together, teaches simply this there is a kingdom and there will be a rule and reign upon the earth, but that rule and reign upon the earth can by no means ever come until there has been the suffering of the cross. And so the biblical teaching is that there is a kingdom by means of a cross, and we must never forget that.

Now the second thing that characterizes our Lord’s answer is the fact that he defers to the Father such matters as whether a person shall sit upon his right hand or upon his left hand. He says the assigning of place in the kingdom is by the Father. Notice that he says in verse 23, but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it has been prepared by my Father.

Now this is a striking thing, I think, and illustrates the fact that the Son of Man, while he was here upon the earth was after all the Son of Man. We must never forget that

the Lord Jesus, though the eternal God is completely man. And while he was here upon the earth, he was directed in all of his activities in the words that he said in the actions that he performed by the Father.

And he himself is obedient to the Father. And there were certain limitations that were placed upon him in his human nature by virtue of that fact. He did not know, he said in his human nature, the time of the Second Advent. That was in the hand of the Father. And this again is a manifestation of the fact that he relied completely upon the Father, acceding to the limitations of the humanity which he had assumed in order that he might be our Savior.

Now you know this whole picture is a rather interesting thing in the light of the customs of ancient eastern courts. In ancient eastern courts, when the court met the central throne was the place of the ruler. And then there were little thrones sitting about which were the places upon which the cull assessors, the important men in the kingdom, sat. And when anyone was received into the presence of the king, he was given a cup of wine as a token of welcome, and he was also shown a bathing pool, and illustrations took place there in order that the person might wash off the dust of those dusty roads and prepare himself for entrance into the presence of the king.

Evidently the Lord Jesus Christ’s answer and also the apostles’ questions had in mind this picture of an ancient throne. So they’re thinking about the Lord sitting upon the throne, and an impressive court, and they are requesting that among those who sit on little thrones around the central throne, they might sit in the central praise places. The Lord Jesus, picking up what was in their minds, reminds them that the situation is entirely different so far as the kingdom of God is concerned. For you see when you enter into the relationship with the king, the cup that you must take and the cup that I must take is not a cup of wine. The cup that I must take is the cup of suffering in which I die for the sins of sinners, and the baptismal, and the pool in which I must be plunged is not an ordinary

pool, but the baptismal pool of death. And so his answer as well as their request is against the picture of these ancient customs.

Now when the Lord Jesus comes to the last of this section he expounds what it is to have true greatness in the kingdom. When you look first at the 24th verse, and when the ten heard i— evidently they didn’t like the power play of the two, and evidently, too, they must have expected a stronger rebuke from the Lord Jesus because I think they would have kept quiet—but since he didn’t rebuke them quite as strongly as they thought, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren.

But Jesus called them and said, “You know you know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them that is over the Gentiles, and they that are great exercise authority over them.” What he says is in the Gentile world, the Gentile rulers tyrannize their underlings. These words of our Lord manifest a remarkable understanding of the nature of Gentile rule. That has been characteristic down through the years. From the time of men such as Alexander, who had as his great ambition the rule of the whole world, through the men such as Napoleon, who ruled by assumption of power and usurpation of power, down to men such as Stalin and Hitler, the Gentile rulers tyrannize their underlings.

Now he says greatness among the saints is not like that. In the 26th verse he says, “It shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.”

Now there are two words here that are used that are important in revealing just exactly wherein consists true greatness. The first is the word, minister. Now that word is an interesting word. It’s the word really from which we get the English word, deacon. Gives a good deal of insight into what a deacon should be, too. *Diakonos* from which we get “deacon.” Incidentally, in ancient Greek, the word *konos* meant dust. So that *diakonos* is derived from the word for dust.

Now why from the word, dust? Because it refers to the dust of hurrying about and scurrying about doing things for others. That’s what a deacon is. He’s a person who stirs up a lot of dust in the service of others. Minister. It’s a beautiful expression of what it is to be great in the church of Jesus Christ. It’s the person who has as his primary interest not himself but others.

And then the second word is the word, servant, in verse 27. That’s the word from which we get, slave. So the idea that lies back of greatness from our Lord’s words is the picture of a person who is busily serving others, who is involved in work that is for the benefit of others, and who is a person who is owned by God. So the ideas of obedient service and ownership, divine ownership, are prominent in our Lord’s exposition of greatness. Well, Frederick the Great was not far off when he said that the king should be the chief of servants, except that when it applies to the church of Jesus Christ it means that the person who is truly great is the person who serves obediently others in the body.

Now that is our Lord’s evaluation of greatness. Of course, we all look for illustrations, and we have the most beautiful illustration now brought by the Lord Jesus. In fact this illustration which introduces this text is so great that it would be impossible for anyone to ever fully expound it. In fact this text is so grand a text that it could never be expounded. For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Now in the remainder of our time this morning I want to look at this text in a little more detail. The first thing I want you to notice is the self-abnegation set forth in verse 28. Even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto.

Now let’s think for a moment about our Lord Jesus and who he was. He’s a person who not only had a sense of authority, but was an authoritarian king. He was a supreme sovereign, authoritative and authoritarian. That’s evident as he carries on his personal ministry. And yet at the same time, his ministry is characterized by humble service. In fact, I think that we can never understand his service any better than we can

when we see it against the backdrop of who he really was. The sovereign and eternal Son of God.

Now he states that he came. I’ve made reference to this a number of times, and I only repeat it for those of you who may not have grasped it, or who were not here. But this text, when he says, even the Son of man came, illustrates even in the use of the terms that he, by which he expresses his ministry, his sovereign power came.

We don’t say that. We don’t say, for example, if we are speaking of ourselves, I came in your midst at such and such a date. I wouldn’t say to you, I came amidst the human race in nineteen hundred—would you like to know? [Laughter] Fifteen. I’m not ashamed of that. I rather like that. I know you’re busily kind of [more laughter] figuring up how exactly, how old Dr. Johnson is. But I wouldn’t say that to you. I wouldn’t say, now, I came into your midst then. What would I say? I would say I was born. The Germans say, *begoren*. I have been born. That’s what we say.

Did you know the Lord Jesus never said but once that he was born? One time and do you know to whom he said it? He said it to Pilate. He said it to a person who probably could not understand these other things about himself. But even when he spoke to Pilate, he said, remember, “to this end was I born,” and then as if to suggest that’s not really the whole story, and Pilate you won’t understand it, but I must say it either for myself or for others, and for this purpose have I come into the world. The only time that he ever said he was born he also said that he came.

The two words that characterize our Lord Jesus in his expression of his entrance among us are the words, come and sent. He says I have come or I have been sent. Doesn’t say I was born. So even the Son of Man came. I’m not like one of the pasteboard kinglets of the Gentiles, like a Hitler. He came and is gone. And the rest of us will come and go if the Lord Jesus does not return. The Son of Man came. The Son of Man was sent. O the conscious authority of the Lord Jesus.

Incidentally, he came. What does that suggest? Well that suggests he was already in existence beforehand. That’s why he speaks of himself as having come, or having been sent. He’s letting us know he was preexistent. Other texts tell us that he was eternal. So he came because he chose to come, and he chose to come because he loved. And beyond that the Scriptures do not go. So the Son of Man came.

Now it says that he came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many, and of course that word, minister, is the second part of this sentence that we want to say just a word about. What characterized the service of the Lord Jesus? Spontaneity? Cheerfulness? I don’t think our Lord ever awakened in the morning and said, now what have I got to do today? I’ve got to do this, and I’ve got to do that before I can enjoy myself. His service as the service of spontaneity. His service was the service of cheerfulness. It was the kind of service that embraced every one with whom he came into contact and reached its climax in the ministry of mercy to that brigand to whom he said, Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.

In other words, the Lord Jesus came to give not to get. You know this expression, that he came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and essentially to give his life, is the refutation of all the theories of the atonement that suggest that the Lord Jesus only came to be a good man to give us an example of how we should live. If you study the theories of the atonement you will discover that many of them lay great stress upon the fact that the life of the Lord Jesus was an exhibition of the love of God, which brings repentance in the heart of man. Nonsense.

Love does not bring repentance in the heart of men. The expression of love in the life of our Lord Jesus does not bring repentance in the heart of any man. All moral influence theories of the atonement, all exemplary theories of the atonement, fall to the ground when we discover that our Lord Jesus came not only to love but to die. And if there is no atonement accomplished by which the Holy Spirit may work in the hearts of men there can be no redemption. He came to minister and to give his life a ransom for

many. And I am so thankful that the service of the Lord Jesus did not end with his life. If that was all that he had done, if he had only served with his life and had not died, then he would be no more than another in a long line of great prophets or great men of the past.

Now he goes on to say, and to give his life a ransom for many. Now this passage, this particular part of that passage, that last clause, to give his life a ransom for many, contains the heart of our Lord’s teaching on atonement. In fact, it is likely that this passage, plus the one we shall study later on when he at the Lord’s Supper explains what he is doing with the bread and the wine. These two passages give us the greatest interpretation by the Lord Jesus of the significance of his death.

Now he came to give his life a ransom for many. Now first of all, notice that he said he came to give his life. Just as he said, above, he came—that is, he existed beforehand, and he came because he chose to come, so he came to give his life a ransom. Come expresses his entrance into life. Give expresses—that is to give his life—expresses his exit from life. And you’ll notice that it is all under the authority and power of his own person. I have come, and I have come to give my life. I have entered human existence, and I am giving my life as I make my exit from human existence.

Now there are two things in our life about which we are not consulted: our birth and our death. That’s so obvious I don’t have to argue the point. You don’t think for one moment I would be here if I’d had my choice. You think for one moment I would want to stand up and preach to you, when I could have preached to men in the days of Luther and Calvin. Don’t think for one moment that I would be here among you if I could have been with the apostles. You see, we are not consulted about that. I’m not asking you whether you would be here, either, listening to me [laughter]. I don’t want to ask that question. You see, we’re not consulted about our time of birth, and we’re not consulted about our time of death. Even when it’s evident that death is eminent, we don’t know when it will come. We’re not consulted about that.

The Lord Jesus came and he came to give. Sovereign in his birth. Sovereign in his death. Cannot help but think of that statement that the country preacher made about death. He said if I knew where I was going to die, I’d never go near the place. [Laughter] I just love that statement. I think that is one of the great statements that someone has made, but how true it is. The Lord Jesus was master of his fate. He came and he came to give his life a ransom for many.

Now of course that expresses the fact that his death was voluntary. It was not forced, it was voluntary. And then he says he came to give his life a ransom. Now the ransom is a price that is paid in order that culprits might be released from certain judgment, so that if the Lord Jesus came to give his life a ransom, it’s evident that they were held for judgment. And ordinarily, they should be culprits who are held for judgment. And the facts are that you and I are culprits and we are held for judgment. We shall be judged. Every one of us. And when our Lord Jesus came to pay the ransom, he came to pay the price that is paid for culprits who are under judgment.

Now this price that is paid to the righteousness and holiness of a God who because of our sins holds us under judgment. Every one of us. We are dying men. The word of the cross is to those that are perishing, Paul says. That’s what we are. We are all on the road to death. Judgment for sin. But he says it is to those who are perishing foolishness. How true that is. So the Lord Jesus comes, then, voluntarily, dies in order to accomplish a ransom.

Now you know nine tenths of the books on the atonement lay great stress on the effects of the atonement upon men. What the atonement does for us. Many say the atonement is an example for us whereby we are won by the example of Christ to repentance. False theory, but it nevertheless has its reference to us. Almost all of the modern books on the atonement have reference to us. But when you turn to the Bible, you will find that in the Bible great stress is laid upon the effect of the atonement upon the mind of God. That is, the atonement makes it possible for a holy God to deliver these

culprits who are under judgment. So the atonement that is the biblical atonement is one that is directed primarily to God, not to men. The atonement of the Lord Jesus terminates primarily upon God then secondarily upon man, and also upon Satan, for it has its reference to him.

Now for just a moment think about this. The Lord Jesus has come, and he has said, I am the one who has come—not to ministered unto but to minister—and to give my life a ransom for many.

Now wait a minute. For many? Yes for many. Well now that’s a remarkable expression of dignity. Because you see, ransom was not generally accomplished that way. When, for example, the armies were exchanging prisoners, it was usually one for one. But occasionally, if a lieutenant or a captain or a major or a general had been captured, then there may be some bargaining. We’ll give you our general that we captured for a whole company of ordinary soldiers. Or if they had captured some beautiful and influential woman, she might be worth more than one or two soldiers. The very fact that the Lord Jesus said he came to give his life a ransom for many would be an arrogant expression of his own position and place were it not so true. No man would stand up and be able to stand up and say, I give my life a ransom for many. It’s an expression of an estimation of his own life that is remarkable and does not make sense if he is not really this authoritative Son of God.

Now he says he came to give his life a ransom for many. Now there’s no question but that this text teaches substitution. In fact, in the Greek text, there is great stress upon this. He came to give his life a ransom instead of many.

Now let’s think for a moment. A substitution. There are only three alternatives if we affirm that Christ offered a penal substitution for all men. Number one, all men are saved, all men are therefore saved because he offered a penal substitution for all men. Incidentally, this many is used because it is contrasted with the one. The one and the many. It is a word of indefiniteness.

But now that’s the first alternative. If the Lord Jesus offered a penal substitution for many and if the many is understood of all men, then one alternative is all men are therefore saved. Second alternative. We understand this as universal redemption provided for all men making salvation for all men every man possible. My old seminary professor used to say Christ died and made all men savable. Dr. Chafer used to love to say that.

Well then what completes the act of salvation? Well ,our faith. Our faith is necessary to make salvation actual. But if that’s true and if faith is not a gift as many often say then we make our salvation actual and we’re no better than semi-Pelegian Arminians who contribute to our salvation our faith. Or if we say, well, faith is a gift of God, we have put them in such a corner that they have to say that. Faith is a gift of God, which incidentally is the biblical teaching.

Then we have to still say some thwart God’s purpose by not believing. Now unbelief of course is a sin, and so we have to say Christ died for all sins, but the sin of unbelief. Incidentally the Bible says that no one thwarts the purpose of God. He accomplishes all of his purposes. Isaiah 14 says that so beautifully, that could be the primary text to which we could turn. Furthermore, if we say that he died to make the salvation of men possible, then we must also deny that his substitution ensures anyone’s salvation. He came and offered substitution, but it does not ensure. It does not make certain the salvation of anyone. That’s a real limited atonement isn’t it?

And finally we must redefine substitution, because according to that theory some people are going to pay for their sins which Christ has paid for: those who do not believe. And Toplady, who wrote a little stanza about this, was wrong then: Payment, God cannot twice demand, first from our bleeding sureties hand and then again at mine. But you see, if it’s really true Christ died for everybody, and everybody is not saved, then some will pay for sins twice. First through the substitute who died for them, and then their own eternal judgment.

The third alternative is a particular redemption. That is, we restrict the scope of substitution to some not all. When the Lord Jesus said to give his life a ransom for many, then our problems are solved if we understand the many to be many from among the Jews, many from among the Gentiles, a vast company of people—not a small group—a vast company of people for whom the Lord Jesus substituted himself and then we have a true substitution in which our Lord does bear the punishment of these and ensures their salvation by providing for the faith by which they gain the benefits of that work that he has accomplished.

Let me say this. I hope you will not be mad at me for saying this. All men limit the atonement except universalists. The Bible is of course so strongly against universalism, we don’t have to even consider that among a group of people who accept the Scriptures. All men limit the atonement. The Arminians limit its power. They say that Christ died for all men but we must provide faith. And so they limit the power of the atonement so that the atonement does not ensure the salvation of anyone.

Others limit its extent. They say God purposed to save certain ones through the substitutionary work of the Lord Jesus in which substitution is truly substitution. Arminians limit the depth of the atonement. The Calvinists limit the extent of the atonement. In the case of the limitation that the Arminians make it is traceable to man, so that men limit God’s work by their rebellion. In the case of the Calvinists, it is God who limits the atonement, limiting the extent of it to those for whom Christ came to die. In the case of the one, it is man who limits the atonement. In the case of the other it is God who limits the atonement. Which one is best?

And if we really truly hold a doctrine of substitution, then the particular redemption, the definite atonement of those for whom Christ came to die makes eminently good sense. Incidentally, if you really do believe in the doctrine of election, well, not fortunately, not one single person’s salvation is affected by these differing views

of the atonement. But I think that unless we are willing to redefine substitution, we must come to particular redemption.

Well it is a great redemption when measured by our sin. It is a great redemption when measured by the sternness of God’s justice. It is a great redemption when measured by the price that was paid, and it’s a great redemption when measured by the extent of deliverance, and the greatness of it is found in a sacrifice accomplished by the Son of God. And he is the illustration of what true greatness is. There is no true consecration to God that does not really include consecration to men. Greatness is the greatness manifested by the Son of God in his sacrifice for us.

If you’re here this morning and you have never believed in our Lord Jesus, we point you to a substitutionary sacrifice which avails, which ensures the salvation of those for whom he came to die, and if God the Holy Spirit has so worked in your heart that you have come to conviction of your sin, and conviction of your need of salvation, conviction of your condemnation, and a sense of need of him, and a sense of desire for him, only God the Holy Spirit brings that.

We can say to you Christ is for you. May God help you to come to him. But if you sit in the audience with no sense of need, no sense whatsoever of guilt, no sense whatsoever of sin, as long as you remain in that condition, there is no atonement for you. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the Son of Man who came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many. O Father, work in the hearts of all who are here for Thy glory.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

“Particular Redemption and Greatness in the Kingdom” by S. Lewis Johnson
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